

from The Shield of St. Patrick

Patrick (c. 390–461)

I bind to myself to-day,
The strong power of the invocation of the Trinity:
The faith of the Trinity in the Unity
The Creator of the elements.

Christ, protect me today
Against poison, against burning,
Against drowning, against wound,
That I may receive abundant reward.

Christ with me, Christ before me,
Christ behind me, Christ within me,
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ at my right, Christ at my left,
Christ where I lie down,
Christ where I sit,
Christ where I stand.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Was Patrick a Catholic?

Kevin T. Bauder

I spent part of my childhood in a heavily Roman Catholic area near Bay City, Michigan. These Catholics were ethnic Poles, but they had no hesitation about celebrating March 17 as Saint Patrick’s Day. For that day, at least, my classmates would be festooned with shamrocks and green. To them, Patrick was a Roman Catholic.

Certain non-Catholics in our community would explain that Patrick was not really a Catholic. He represented a strain of evangelical Christianity that remained suppressed until the Protestant Reformation. Later on, I heard this assertion repeated during my preparation for ministry.

A few summers ago, I happened to be conversing with a PhD from the Center for Medieval Studies who specialized in Patrick. She insisted that Patrick was certainly Roman Catholic. She pointed out that Patrick endorsed the doctrines that were being advanced by the bishop of Rome at that time.

The key expression is *at that time*. What time was that? According to the best accounts, Patrick was born sometime around 390 and died around 461. Those dates place him among the church fathers. Gregory of Nazianzus died the year before Patrick was born, and Gregory of Nyssa died when Patrick was five years old. The heretic Apollinaris died in the year of Patrick’s birth. Patrick’s life overlapped with luminaries like Ambrose, Chrysostom, Jerome, Augustine, and Cyril of Alexandria. The heretic Eutyches was about ten years older than Patrick, and Patrick died in the same year as Leo the Great. He was in his sixties at the time of the Council of Chalcedon.

When Patrick was alive, the Roman Empire, though divided and weakened, had not yet fallen. Neither the Monophysite nor the Monothelite controversies had broken out. The first of the Medieval Popes, Gregory I, would not ascend to the papal chair for a century and a third. Eastern and Western Christianity would not divide for more than five hundred years. The Council of Trent would not finally define Roman Catholicism for more than a millennium.

These names and dates are significant for a reason. During the lifetime of Patrick, neither the term *Catholic* nor the word *Roman* meant what it means



today. *Catholic* was a Greek term, καθ' ὅλος (*kath-holos*), meaning *according to the whole* or *universal*. A Catholic at that time was simply someone who agreed with the orthodox consensus represented by the Councils of Nicea (325) and Constantinople (381).

These councils had articulated a biblical understanding of the relationship of Christ to God the Father. They responded to the Arian heresy, which taught that Christ was a created being, not fully God, and that there was a time when Christ did not exist. These councils insisted that Christ was truly God, fully equal to and eternal with the Father, and of one substance with Him. Because these perspectives were advanced by councils comprising Christians from everywhere that churches existed, they were called Ecumenical, and their consensus was considered Catholic or universal Christian teaching. In this sense of the term, all Bible-believing Christians are still Catholic.

During Patrick's lifetime other disputes arose. The most serious was the Eutychian controversy. Eutychians taught that Christ's human nature was so overwhelmed by His divine nature that it became inconsequential. It was like a drop of wine in an ocean of water. The result was a near-denial of Christ's real humanity. The Eutychian controversy is what led to the Council of Chalcedon in 451, where church leaders wrestled to articulate a biblical understanding of the relationship of the divine to the human within Christ. They taught that Christ was one person in two natures. He was fully human and fully divine. The person, they said, must not be divided, while the natures must not be mixed or confused.

Chalcedon did not invent these teachings. Rather, the council systematized the mainstream understanding of Christians in view of biblical teaching. For this reason, the teachings of Chalcedon have also been recognized as part of genuinely Catholic teaching, and in this sense all Bible-believing Christians today are genuinely Catholic.

Patrick was certainly Catholic in this sense. Was he also Roman? One major defender of the teachings of Nicea and Constantinople was Leo the Great, who became bishop of Rome during Patrick's lifetime. Leo was also active in calling the Council of Chalcedon. In the western Roman empire, he was a major opponent of Eutychianism. To take the Catholic view was necessarily to take the Roman view, and in this sense, Patrick clearly sympathized with Rome.

Nevertheless, Patrick was born in Scotland, west and a bit north of present-day Glasgow. His town was on (and maybe beyond) the very fringes of the Roman Imperial influence. Patrick's father was a minor Roman official, and his grandfather was a pastor (certainly not what would be considered Roman Catholic today). Christianity in Patrick's corner of the world was not much influenced by the concerns of the church at Rome, at least not directly.

At this point in history, the bishop of Rome did not exercise authority over most other churches. Leo tried to increase the prestige of the Roman bishop by presenting himself as an older statesman and wise counselor to younger pastors. Even so, other pastors were known to tell him to mind his own business.

Patrick was never sent out as a missionary by Rome. He did not receive church office from Rome. To this day, the Roman Catholic Church has never canonized him as a saint.

Was Patrick a Roman Catholic? The question is anachronistic. He was Catholic in the sense that he fully embraced the Catholic doctrinal consensus about Jesus Christ. He could be called Roman only in the sense that he must have felt some degree of solidarity with Leo in the doctrinal controversies of his day. He definitely was not a Roman Catholic in any *modern* sense—but neither was anybody else, including Leo. On the other hand, he was hardly a crypto-Protestant either. The five solas, including justification through faith alone, were not to be articulated for another millennium. Such beliefs, while present in the ancient church, remained undeveloped for centuries.

By his own testimony, Patrick was a rebellious youth who had been reared under Christian teaching. Brought low in slavery, he seems genuinely to have turned to Christ. After his escape he matured in the faith and eventually returned to his home, only to feel a burden to reach the very people who had enslaved him. He returned to Ireland and preached Christ among the pagans, many of whom responded to his preaching. For that we can thank God, and we can nourish a hope that we may likely meet Patrick among God's people someday. He was broadly Catholic, perhaps marginally Roman, but almost certainly a saint.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
